

1. INTRODUCTION

This Environmental Impact Report (EIR) describes the potential environmental effects of the proposed Fresno County General Plan. As required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA of 1970, as amended), this EIR (1) assesses the expected project-specific and cumulative impacts of the ultimate environmental changes resulting from the projected growth in population and employment in the County through the year 2020, (2) identifies means of avoiding or minimizing potential adverse impacts, and (3) evaluates reasonable alternatives to the Proposed Project, including the required No Project Alternative. The Fresno County Board of Supervisors is the "lead agency" for the project evaluated in this EIR and as such has the principal responsibility for approving the project.

State General Plan Requirements

State law requires that every city and county in California adopt a general plan that is comprehensive and long-term. The plans must outline proposals for the physical development of the County or city, and any land outside its boundaries which in the planning agency's judgment bears relation to its planning (California Government Code Section 65300 et seq.). General plans must be comprehensive both in their geographic coverage and in the range of subjects they cover. General plans must also be long-term in perspective. General plan time horizons vary, but typically range from 15 to 25 years into the future.

Every general plan in California must address seven topics or 'elements.'

The relative importance of each of the seven required elements will, of course, vary from community to community. Following are brief descriptions of what State law requires be addressed in each of the seven elements:

1. The **Land Use Element** designates the general distribution and intensity of all uses of the land in the community. This includes residential uses, commercial uses, industrial uses, public facilities, and open space, among others.
2. The **Circulation Element** identifies the general location and extent of existing and proposed major transportation facilities, including major roadways, rail and transit, and airports.
3. The **Housing Element** is a comprehensive assessment of current and projected housing needs for all segments of the community and all economic groups that also embodies policies and programs for providing adequate housing.
4. The **Conservation Element** addresses the conservation; development; and use of natural resources including water, forests, soils, rivers, and mineral deposits.

5. Overlapping the conservation element, the **Open Space Element** details plans and measures for preserving open space for: protection of natural resources—such as wildlife habitat; the managed production of resources—such as agricultural and timber land; outdoor recreation—such as parks, trails, and scenic vistas; and public health and safety—such as areas subject to geologic hazards, tsunamis, flooding, and fires.
6. The **Noise Element** identifies and appraises noise problems and includes policies to protect the community from excessive noise.
7. The **Safety Element** establishes policies and programs to protect the community from risks associated with seismic, geologic, flood, and wildfire hazards.

The general plan may also address other topics that the community feels are relevant to its development, such as scenic resources, historic preservation, and urban design. For each locally relevant mandated issue or optional issue addressed, the general plan must do the following:

- Describe the nature and significance of the issue in the community (*Background Information*)
- Set-out policy in text and maps for how the jurisdiction will respond to the issue (*Policy*)
- Outline specific programs for implementing policies (*Implementation Programs*)

The format and structure of the general plan is left to local discretion, but regardless of the format or issues addressed, all substantive parts of the plan must be consistent with one another (i.e., *internally consistent*).

For instance, the policies in the land use element must be consistent with those of the housing element and vice versa.

Purpose of the Fresno County General Plan EIR

CEQA mandates the preparation of EIRs for projects or programs that have the potential of resulting in adverse impacts on the environment. The CEQA Guidelines (Section 15080) provide the following general direction concerning the coordination of planning and environmental impact assessment:

To the extent possible, the EIR should be combined with the existing planning, review, and project approval process used by each public agency.

Consistent with Section 15166 of the CEQA Guidelines, several General Plan documents are being used to satisfy the requirements for a draft EIR for a General Plan. These documents are: the *Draft General Plan Policy Document*,¹ which lists the proposed goals, policies, and implementation

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Note that the proposed Policy Document does not include an updated Housing Element because by State Law an update of the Housing Element is not required until June 2002. The existing Housing Element adopted in 1991 will continue to be part of the General Plan.

programs; the *Draft General Plan Background Report*, which describes the existing environment, demographics, and trends in Fresno County; and this EIR, which assesses the environmental implications and effects of the General Plan. Together, these documents address the issues required by State law to be covered in an EIR. These documents are available for public review at:

County of Fresno
Planning and Resource Management Department
Development Services Division, Suite "A"
2220 Tulare Street
Fresno, CA 93721

The purpose of the General Plan Update EIR is to:

- to satisfy the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA);
- to inform the general public, the local community, and responsible and interested public agencies about possible environmental effects, possible measures to mitigate those effects, and alternatives to the Proposed Project;
- to enable the Fresno County Board of Supervisors to consider environmental consequences when deciding whether to approve the proposed General Plan and the proposed Economic Development Strategy; and
- to provide a basis for preparation of tiered environmental documents pursuant to the requirements of Section 15385 of the CEQA Guidelines and Public Resource Code Sections 21083 and 21087.

As a comprehensive plan, the General Plan is intended to apply to and establish standards for all types of land use activities under County jurisdiction. However, there are certain land uses that are not regulated by the General Plan and other local zoning regulations. Instead, they are enabled through State and federal laws. Examples of such uses include lands subject to the Forest Practices Act, community college sites, certain residential care facilities, and public access to public resources. While some or all of these preemptive uses can have an effect on the General Plan, they are deemed to meet State-wide and regional environmental, social, and economic goals that can best be accommodated through State and federal control. In addition to these areas that are preempted by statutes, there are a number of other special planning areas that are related to, but are not a part of, the Proposed Project, and, therefore, are not analyzed in this EIR. These include airport land use plans and community plans. Finally, the County General Plan does not apply to the incorporated areas, which are subject to City General Plans.

From a CEQA perspective, the proposed Fresno County General Plan differs from a typical plan or development project. The Proposed Project includes no revisions to land use diagrams in County-adopted regional, community or specific plans and only minor revisions to current land use designations for incorporated areas of these other planning areas. The plan does not identify any new growth areas in the incorporated portion of the County

include updated land use maps for County planning areas or identify more specific locations where future growth would occur. Those land use decisions would be made in the future by the County Board of Supervisors for unincorporated areas and City Councils for incorporated areas. The County's population is assumed to grow at the same rate with or without the proposed General Plan. Chapter 2, Project Description, provides a detailed discussion of the project components and assumptions used in this EIR.

Scope of the EIR

This EIR is a Program EIR, pursuant to Section 15168 of the CEQA Guidelines. The Program EIR is an informational document designed to inform and support the local planning and decision-making process. A Program EIR assesses the impacts of a series of actions that can be characterized as one large project and are related in one of the four ways described in Section 15168(a) of the CEQA Guidelines:

- geographically;
- as logical parts in a chain of contemplated actions;
- in connection with issuance of rules, regulations, plans, or other general criteria to govern the conduct of a continuing program; or
- as individual activities carried out under the same authorizing statutory or regulatory authority and having generally similar environmental effects which can be mitigated in similar ways.

The analysis of environmental impacts is, by necessity, general in nature.

It is not intended to provide project-specific analysis for individual projects, although future projects may tier off of information in this EIR.

Future site-specific projects may rely on impact conclusions without having to prepare new EIRs to address cumulatively significant impacts.

In preparing the General Plan, 1976 General Plan policies and implementation programs were comprehensively reviewed and updated in an effort to make them as current and effective as possible. The General Plan Update is intended to be self-mitigating; it is assumed impacts identified in this EIR would generally be mitigated through adopted federal, State, and local laws and regulations, through the implementation of identified General Plan policies for unincorporated areas of the County, or some combination thereof, rather than through measures independent of the General Plan. The proposed policies are listed in the *General Plan Public Review Draft Policy Document*, which is available for public review at:

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Fresno, CA 93721

The focus of the EIR analysis is on the changes that would occur due to the increased economic activity engendered by the Economic Development Strategy. The policy direction of the strategy is reflected through the Draft General Plan, and more specifically in the Economic Development Element. Most of the growth associated with the Economic Development Strategy is assumed to occur within the incorporated cities' spheres of

influence. It is assumed that projects within the spheres would be annexed, and therefore subject to city discretionary action, rather than the County. The County would have jurisdiction over the relatively small proportion of growth (estimated at approximately 7 percent of total County growth) that would occur outside of the incorporated areas and their spheres. This EIR assumes that County population and employment would increase to levels currently projected by the California Department of Finance. Therefore, this is a worst-case assumption and the impacts evaluated would represent the maximum extent of identified adverse effects.

It should be noted that the EIR attempts to quantify project impacts where possible. Although used for analytical purposes, these numbers are approximations. Actual numbers may vary slightly, with no invalidation of this analysis or its conclusions.

Levels of Significance

This EIR uses a variety of terms to describe the level of significance of adverse impacts identified during the course of the environmental analysis. The following are definitions of terms used in this EIR:

- **Significant and Unavoidable Impact** - Impacts that exceed the defined standards of significance and that cannot be eliminated or reduced to a less-than-significant level, either because feasible mitigation measures do not exist, or such measures would be under the jurisdiction of an agency other than the County.
- **Significant Impact** - Impacts that exceed the defined standards of significance and that can be eliminated or reduced to a less-than-significant level through the implementation of feasible mitigation measures.
- **Potentially Significant Impact** - Significant impacts that may ultimately be determined to be less than significant; the level of significance may be reduced in the future through implementation of policies or guidelines (which are not required by statute or ordinance), or through further definition of the project detail in the future. Potentially significant impacts may also be impacts where there is not enough information to make a finding; however, for the purpose of this EIR, they are considered significant. Such impacts are equivalent to significant impacts and require the identification of feasible mitigation measures.
- **Less-Than-Significant Impact** - Impacts that are adverse but that do not exceed the defined standards of significance.

Development under the Proposed Project would occur within both incorporated and unincorporated areas (see Chapter 2, Project Description for more detail). Within the unincorporated areas, the County has the jurisdiction to enforce Draft General Plan policies and the mitigation measures identified in this EIR. Similar policies and measures are available to the cities to direct development within their boundaries. However, the County cannot compel the cities to adopt and implement such measures for

development in the incorporated areas. Therefore, the findings of significance may differ for impacts due to development in the unincorporated areas versus the incorporated areas. Where applicable, the impact discussions reflect these differences. In addition, Table 3-1, Summary of Impacts and Mitigation Measures, identifies the significance of each impact for areas within County jurisdiction and those areas outside of the County's jurisdiction.

Environmental Review Process

A Notice of Preparation (NOP) was prepared and circulated for a 30-day period of public review comment on April 30, 1999. A copy of the NOP is included in this document (Appendix A). Comments on the NOP are also included in this EIR (Appendix B). This Draft EIR is being publicly circulated beginning on March 3, 2000, for a 45-day period of review and comment by the public and other interested parties, agencies, and organizations. The public review period concludes on April 21, 2000. Comments relating to the Draft EIR may also be presented orally during the public hearings on April 6 and April 20, 2000. All comments or questions about the EIR should be addressed to:

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Following the public hearing on this document and after the close of the written public comment period, responses to written and oral comments on the environmental effects of the project will be prepared and published in a supplement to this document. The Final EIR (comprised of this Draft EIR and the published supplement containing comments received on this Draft EIR and responses) will then be considered by the Fresno County Board of Supervisors in a public meeting and will be certified if it is determined to be in compliance with CEQA.

Organization of this EIR

This EIR is organized into the following sections:

Chapter 1 - Introduction: Provides an introduction and overview describing the intended use of the EIR and the review and certification process.

Chapter 2 - Project Description: Provides a description of the proposed General Plan, background information, objectives, and characteristics related to projected population and employment growth.

Chapter 3 - Summary of Impacts and Mitigation Measures: Summarizes environmental impacts that would result from implementation of the General Plan, describes proposed mitigation measures, and indicates the level of significance of impacts after mitigation.

Chapter 4 - Environmental Analysis: Contains the programmatic and cumulative analysis of environmental issue areas. The subsection for each environmental issue contains an introduction and description of the existing setting, standards of significance, methodology used to evaluate impacts, proposed General Plan policies, identifies impacts, and recommends appropriate mitigation measures. Additional information on the scope of the technical analyses is provided below.

Chapter 5 - Other CEQA Considerations: Provides discussions required by CEQA regarding impacts that would result from implementation of the General Plan, including: a summary of cumulative impacts; potential growth-inducing impacts; and unavoidable significant impacts that cannot be mitigated.

Chapter 6 - Alternatives Analysis: Describes the alternatives to the proposed General Plan and their associated environmental effects.

Chapter 7 - References: Itemizes supporting and reference data used in the preparation of the EIR.

Chapter 8 - Report Preparation: Lists report authors by section, agency staff, and others who assisted in the preparation and review of the EIR.

Appendices: Includes appendices to the EIR.

Mitigation Monitoring

CEQA requires that when a public agency makes findings based on an EIR, the public agency must adopt a reporting or monitoring program for those measures which it has adopted or made a condition of the project approval in order to mitigate or avoid significant effects on the environment (Public Resources Code Section 21081.6). The reporting or monitoring program must be designed to ensure compliance during project implementation (Public Resources Code Section 21081.6).

The Mitigation Monitoring Program for the General Plan will be prepared for all mitigation measures identified in the EIR. The Mitigation Monitoring Program will be considered by the Board of Supervisors in conjunction with approval of the General Plan and certification of the EIR.